

HEART OF YOUTH¹

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From The Midland

THE boy on the cultivator straightened as the horses walked from the soft, spongy ground of the corn-field to the firmer turf at the side of the road. He spoke sharply to the plodding team and turned the cultivator around, lowering the blades for another row. Then, when the horses had fallen into a slow walk, he slouched down, and with bent head watched the hills of young corn pass beneath him.

He could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen, for his eager eyes looked out from under soft lashes, and his face showed the smooth, healthy tan of a boy. His brown hands were so small that he could barely keep a firm grasp on the heavy levers. When he raised the blades, his fingers became streaked with red and the corners of his mouth drew back and grew hard with concentrated effort. Occasionally he tugged at the reins knotted about his shoulders, but, except for his low, abrupt commands to the horses, he was silent. At the end of the row he raised the shovels, got off the cultivator stiffly, and stretched himself out in the new spring grass of a little rise by the roadside.

All around him the world was full of soft color and light. Close by, in the sun the corn-field was a sea of shimmering green, while the more distant fields of grain were dark against the light ash of plowed land. Above, the sun shone slanting from the blue of an early June

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sky. The air, clean and clear, was already pervaded with the drowsy lassitude of noon.

The boy looked listlessly out over the long rows of corn still to be cultivated. Near at hand the young stalks seemed strong enough to win in their struggle toward the sun, but the distant corn lay like a filmy shadow of green on the black soil. Behind the cultivator, a flock of blackbirds fed in the fresh-turned earth. The boy watched them with half-shut eyes. When one of the birds had fed, it would hop upon a lump of wet, black earth, and being satisfied that it could eat no more, would skim in rapid, undulating flight to the row of willows in the next pasture. On a fence-post, a meadow-lark filled the silence with a liquid flow of music. As it laid back its head in an abandon of joy, the boy noticed how the sun accentuated the vivid splash of black on its yellow throat.

The meadow-lark flew away. The boy got up and climbed listlessly into the cultivator seat. The tugs straightened and the horses walked again into the corn. One of the team, however, a heavy, powerful bay, lagged continually, at times almost stopping.

The cultivator slid sidewise, and the blades tore the corn out by the roots. The boy jerked the reins, slapping them over the horse's back. "Get along there, Jim!" he called. Jim pulled evenly for a moment, then lagged again. In sudden violence of anger, the boy pulled cruelly at the horse's mouth, cursing in low, abrupt sentences. The horse stopped, the blades slipped, again tearing up a hill of corn. From sheer rage the boy was silent, then he jumped from the cultivator, and gathering the slack of the reins, hit the horse about the head with all his might. His face was dry and white, his eyes blazing. As he continued to strike the horse, he found expression.

"You damn, lazy brute, you! I'll show you who's running this job—you or me!" His words came sharply, in gasps, between blows. Then he cursed again;

cursed the work and the horse. Fine lines of fatigue showed in his face. At last he stopped. A slight color had come to his cheeks. For a moment he watched the horse, which stood with muscles moving in quivering ripples of pain and fear; then he walked soberly back and climbed upon the cultivator seat. The horses moved on. They walked evenly now, starting at any movement of the boy, who stared steadily at the swiftly moving ground, two red spots still burning through the tan of his cheeks.

They went once across the field. On the return, the boy stopped impetuously by the road and jumping down from the seat walked to the horse he had beaten. The horse quivered and shied toward its mate. The boy stroked its neck.

"Whoa, Jim! Whoa, boy!" he repeated.

He hesitated a moment, then went across the road to the meadow and picked an armful of young tufts of clover. He fed it to the horses, a handful at a time. They ate eagerly, all trace of fear gone as they reached out their necks for the young grass. Over the boy's face passed a conflict of expressions. At one time the cheeks were soft, and a boyish look lay in his eyes. Then came a strange, dry expression, as of age, which formed tense lines about his mouth; but as he climbed up to the seat of the cultivator, the softer expression remained.

The horses were beginning to draw at the tugs when the boy heard a horse galloping on the road behind him. He looked back. One of the neighbor boys, Bill Symonds, was riding furiously down the hill. The boy turned quickly about in the seat as if he had not seen Bill and tried to hurry the horses. What did Bill want, anyway? It was like him to blunder along when he was n't wanted! His big, greasy face shaded by the long hair falling unkempt over his forehead had always made the boy dislike Bill. He tightened the reins.

"Hey, Frank, wait a minute!" Bill slid awkwardly from the colt's back.

The boy twisted the reins about the levers and turned in the seat.

"How are you, Bill," he answered without animation.

Bill tied the colt, a bay, to the willows.

"Well, what do you think of my new colt?" He came closer and lounged forward against the fence. "I broke him in myself — all alone, too! Now, that was a job, Lord! You ought t' seen him buckin' an' standin' on his hind legs!"

They were silent for a moment. Bill amused himself by flinging clods at the colt, which jumped wildly each time one struck him, his body quivering, his eyes white and distended.

After a few clods Bill turned to the boy.

"I guess maybe I'll be leavin' soon."

The boy looked up quickly.

"Yep. I'm goin' off to my brother's ranch in Dakota. I'm gettin' tired of the work here — it's too hard. It's work, work, work all the time with a little while for eatin' and sleepin'. All summer you c'n work your head off and then in winter you can lay off for a couple of months and don't know what to do."

The boy looked out over the fields. Even Bill could go away. The heavy, flabby cheeks, from which the small eyes peered inquisitively, disgusted the boy. Bill picked up another bit of turf and threw it so that the colt jumped wildly, pulling the young willows almost to the ground.

The boy turned to Bill, his face flushed.

"Say — if you want to stay around here you got to cut out firing stones at that colt. You'll never get 'im tame that way — you thick-headed fool!"

Bill stood quiet for a moment. The boy saw an expression of incredulous surprise on Bill's face. Then it became brick-red. He did not wait for Bill to answer but started the horses.

When he looked back, Bill was riding away over the top of the hill, his body swaying with the rhythm of the

gallop. The boy was glad that Bill was angry. He did n't want people around. And besides, why did Bill have a chance to go away? His eyes grew hot.

The morning passed slowly. When finally the shadow of the cottonwood tree at the corner of the pasture pointed directly to the north, the boy unhitched, cleaned the cultivator shovels carefully with a handful of grass, and placed them upon the hooks. With the reins about his back, he trudged up the long slope of the hill, through the warm dust, swinging his water-pail in cadence with his steps. They reached the top of the hill. The house was only a short distance from the road. He could see his father carrying a basket of wood to the house. He hoped that his father would not come and help him unharness the horses. He wanted to be alone; he dreaded facing their conversation at the dinner-table. His eyes grew hot again. Everything was so old to him! He always came home just at dinner time, his father always worked about the barn, finishing work a little before so that he might help unharness the horses. And dinner was always ready when they came in the house. The boy kicked a clod viciously.

At the water trough he stopped and the thirsty horses drank deeply. His father came out of the barn, a pitchfork in his hand, and sat down on the edge of the trough, fanning himself with his hat. The boy noticed that his father seemed more tired than usual. His brown hair was already mixed with gray and was damp where the hat had rested. His eyes seemed less cheerful than usual, and his face less red.

When the horses raised their heads from the trough, the boy led them to their stalls. His father followed him.

"How was cultivatin', Frank?" he asked as he stepped into the barn.

"Oh, it was n't bad."

"The ground was pretty hard, was n't it?"

"Not very."

In silence they unharnessed the horses, which buried

their heads in the newly-cut hay and blew the fragrant, spicy dust from their nostrils. As the boy unloosed the collar of his horse, it slipped and fell upon his foot. His face writhed in a flash of temper and he began cursing in a low tone, heavily and deliberately. Then he picked up the collar and struck the horse. Under lowered eyelashes he saw his father stand in the doorway, his face white with repressed anger. The boy stopped suddenly. He had never seen his father look like that before. He heard him turn in the doorway.

The horses fed, they walked through the hot, deserted farm-yard to the house. As they entered the shaded living-room, his mother came from the kitchen, humming a bit of tune. Her eyes lit up when she saw them. She talked cheerfully as she worked. The boy said nothing. He seemed to be looking out of the open window into the orchard; instead, through his lowered eyelashes, he followed his mother's movements about the room as she set the small table for three, still humming as she worked. The boy saw that she stopped often to cough. This was not unusual, but once the cough became so strong that it left her face colorless. Uneasily sympathetic, he noted that after this she did not hum again. Whenever she looked his way, the boy turned his head, not so soon but that he could see and feel the half-fearful appeal that darkened her eyes.

After the glasses had been filled, the three drew up to the table. The dinner was eaten in silence. The eyes of the boy constantly returned to his mother's face. Somehow she seemed different to-day. He wished that she did n't wear that black dress, it made her face look too white and her eyes too large and bright. He ate rapidly. Why did n't his father and mother talk? They used to tease him about one of the neighbor girls. But they had not for a long time now. He wondered why. Why did n't they say something? It was too still.

As soon as he had finished his meal, he drank the water left in his glass and pushed back his chair. His mother

looked quickly at his father. The boy watched them closely and uneasily. Both seemed to be shrinking from something. His father carefully folded and unfolded his newspaper. Then he laid it beside his plate and cleared his throat. He turned in his chair.

"Wait a minute, Frank," he spoke with hesitation.

The boy turned, looked at his father a moment, and then sat down.

"I don't think we'll cultivate this afternoon, Frank," his father commenced slowly.

"Why —" The boy started to speak but stopped. He saw the frightened grayness return to his mother's face. His father, too, seemed restless. He crossed and recrossed his knees nervously.

"Well, Frank," he continued, "it's this way. Your Ma ain't been feelin' well for quite a while and we rode over to the doctor's this morning to see what was the matter."

His mother had gone back of his chair. He could feel her hand on his shoulders. He turned half-round, his hands grasping the chair tightly.

"You mustn't be scared, Frank — the doctor said it was n't so very bad."

He could feel her twining his hair about her fingers.

He turned, faced his mother silently, half afraid, as though some grim barrier stood between them. He saw fine lines about her gray eyes, and their color seemed heavy and faded. The boy sat staring at his mother with an intensity that made a color come to her cheeks, but he was not looking at her any more. Instead, he was wondering fiercely why he had never noticed the gray in her hair or the lines in her face, or the cough. The cough — surely he might have noticed that. His body lay limp against the back of the chair.

"The doctor said that Ma was pretty sick," his father was speaking on, his voice devoid of life or feeling. "But he said that she 'ud be all right if she went some place where the air was drier."

"What did he say it was?" he asked in a strained voice.

"It's her lungs, he says."

They were silent after this. He was looking out of the window at a far-away straw-stack which lay a mass of dull gold in the sombre setting of plowed land.

His mother still stood behind his chair. In the heavy silence of the room he could hear her uneven breathing. He heard his father turn in his chair.

"Well, Mother's got to go west—we might all of us go," he spoke with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Maybe we can work a small farm out there."

"What will we do with the farm here?" As she spoke the boy felt his mother's hand press more heavily on his shoulder. He turned from the window and caught his father's eyes looking at him. He saw his face flush.

"I guess we got to sell it. I can get a fair price. Help is scarce and rent's low since the dry years. We can't afford to rent it."

Again the boy caught his father's glance resting hopefully on him.

"But we can't sell the old place; we have worked it too long."

The boy was uneasily conscious of the break in his mother's voice. He sat up, his body stiffened. Did they expect him to stay on the farm? He would n't—he could not do that! They had no right to ask this of him. But he remembered the quick hope in his father's eyes.

He got up from his chair, walked past his mother without looking at her, picked up his hat and went outside, closing the screen-door noiselessly behind him.

The earth slept warm in the drowsiness of early afternoon. The freshness of the morning had passed and a languorous mist had fallen. The boy looked out to where earth and sky met in a haze of indefinable color. What a wonderful earth was beyond! He turned and

walked heavily away. They had n't any right to expect that!

Half-unconsciously he went toward the grove north of the house where he had played when he was a little boy. The neighbor boys would collect in the grove on a quiet summer afternoon, dressed as Indians, and in heavy seriousness would plan a desperate attack on the little white house with its green trimmings. What happy times they used to have! But he was n't a boy any more, he had grown up; still he felt an expectant eagerness as he entered the cool shade of the trees.

He followed a path, indistinct now in the rank growth of gooseberry bushes, until he reached his destination. A tree, broken off a couple of feet from the ground, had left a high stump with some ragged splinters, serving as the back of a natural chair.

The boy sat for a while, leaning back with lowered eyelashes. The dim spaces of the grove brought old memories. As he brooded there, relaxed, the sunlight coming in broken fragments through the oak leaves softened his face into almost that of a child.

Suddenly he straightened in desperate rebellion. Why did things have to happen so? He did n't want to grow older—he would rather be a boy. If he were, his father and mother would not expect him to stay on the farm. With his reflections came the picture of his mother, her dark eyes shining unnaturally out of the rigid paleness of her face. Then the black dress with its long folds—it was horrible. The boy's thoughts blurred into a confusion of sharp emotions.

As he lay back again, with lowered eyelids, he was vaguely conscious of the life about him. Robins hopped from branch to branch, singing and chirping. A blue-jay, in a cracked crescendo, was attacking the established order of things among birds. A bee droned idly past. Occasionally all sounds ceased, and silence, deep and impenetrable, seemed to close in. After a moment, the confused murmur of the woods began again.

In the underbrush near him, the boy became aware of a fluttering noise. At first he could see nothing; then he saw a snake—a blue racer—writhing along the ground, while above it, making queer little noises of distress, hovered a brown wood-thrush. He stiffened. His flesh always crawled at the sight of a snake! Yet, leaning forward, he watched intently. The thrush, its body a blur of brown feathers, rose and fell in continuous attack. Then he saw the reason. A few yards from the tree-stump lay a nest, hidden in a clump of gooseberry bushes. Above the rim showed a circle of hungry gaping beaks. The snake was crawling steadily toward the nest.

It was almost there. The thrush became wild in fear for its young. Again and again its body flashed in silent deadly attack. The snake, rearing its head from the ground, its jaws wide, struck back at the fluttering terror above it.

The snake reached the nest. It writhed over the edge. With a quick, sharp note the bird flung itself upon its enemy. A blur of brown feathers and a glimpse of a twisting, bluish body were all that the boy could see. A moment, and the snake writhed out from the nest. The thrush lay on the ground, blood crimsoning the speckled white of its breast. Its wings fluttered slightly, then the body was still.

The boy leaned back against the trunk and closed his eyes. He released his breath sharply. His throat contracted so that he almost choked. He had always had a horror of seeing a creature maimed or killed. He felt it doubly now, and he might have helped the bird,—no one else could. Yet it was only a bird; such things happened continually—they had to be: but he could not forget the flutterings of the dying thrush. Then, suddenly, he remembered his mother.

After a long time, he opened his eyes. The trees, the sky,—all the country was asleep; the absolute tranquillity of space lay lightly in the air and bathed the

earth with a drowsy light. And the boy yielded himself to the silence. His eyes mirrored the mystic, reflective mood of the afternoon.

In the west, ragged clouds massed together and spread over the sky, their long streamers, black where they reached the sun, darkening the earth with the gray, misty twilight of the storm. Then a cool breeze sprang up, the clouds receded, and the sun shone out.

The boy became conscious that it was late and jumped down from his seat. He felt strangely cheerful. The confused emotions which had raged in him all the afternoon had spent themselves, and he whistled as he walked on between the trees. When he turned into the lane near the house, he could see, in the west, a few black masses of cloud, vivid against the crimson flame of the sky—wandering spirits in an infinity of lonely space.

At the windmill he stopped and looked toward the house. The kitchen was lighted; the rest of the house was dark and shadowy. A thin spiral of smoke twisted up until it became lost in the gray light. How home-like it all was! The boy walked quickly toward the house, took the milk pails from the hooks on the porch and went into the barn. The horses did not raise their heads from the grain as he entered. The sound of their crunching, the sweet smell of the hay, seemed part of the pervading rest and content about him. His father came up from the gloom of the barn, carrying a pail of milk. He glanced at the boy.

"I thought I'd do the chores to-night, son. You don't get a vacation very often. You ought to rest."

"Oh!" The boy felt sudden embarrassment. He had a queer pity for his father. He almost wished that he could have done the chores himself.

It was dark as they walked slowly to the house. In the dusk of the east, the moon appeared red on the rim of the horizon. Everything seemed asleep, yet infinite life still vibrated through its sleep. Out of the oak-grove sounded the hopeless lament of the turtle-dove, voicing

the mystery and sadness of the night. From the farm to the north came the faint cry of someone calling the cows, "Co-o, boss; co-o, boss!" A moment, the boy felt as though it were the wonder and music of the horizon that called. Then he smiled at the idea.

His father stopped on the porch. The boy knew what his father was thinking, knew with a wave of pity and understanding. It seemed to him there, in the darkness, that suddenly he was able to comprehend the shadows which he had not known before in his boyish dream of life.

He took off his hat. The night wind was cool. How intense the night was! Nature seemed a living and beautiful power, ever-veiled but always near. For a moment his father rested his hand upon the boy's shoulder. The boy moved closer to him.